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No mistake, no firings, Reagan says

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President Reagan met his top advisers for more than two hours yesterday and after it was over the White House said they had not discussed "personnel."

"I didn't make a mistake [in secretly shipping arms to Iran]," Mr. Reagan said, when confronted briefly by reporters before the meeting. "I'm not firing anybody."

Participants in the session said the discussion was about "the Middle East," including Iran.

Nevertheless, rumors persisted that Secretary of State George Shultz, White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan and National Security Adviser John Poindexter were on their way out.

The names most frequently mentioned continued to be Howard Baker, the former Senate majority leader, as a substitute for Mr. Shultz, and Drew Lewis, former transportation secretary, to replace Mr. Regan.

Other high administration sources said late last night that James Baker, the Treasury secretary, and not Howard Baker, was the "Baker" that Nancy Reagan has in mind as her recommended replacement for the secretary of state.

Mr. Shultz, Mr. Poindexter, Mr. Regan, Vice President George Bush, CIA Director William Casey, Attorney General Edwin Meese and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger attended the meeting.

Lt. Col. Oliver North, a staff member of the National Security Council and a key player in the Iranian dealings, also attended. The Justice Department was said to be investigat-

ing Col. North and others to determine whether U.S. officials broke the law by allowing arms to be shipped to Iran through a third country in 1985. As part of this investigation, Col. North was said to have been questioned for several hours at the department this past weekend.

Justice Department officials confirmed they are reviewing the U.S. dealings with Iran in 1985 leading up to the intelligence "finding" on Jan. 17, 1986, which permitted Mr. Reagan to waive former President Jimmy Carter's embargo on arms to Iran.

Officials said that Col. North, an aide to Mr. Poindexter, was questioned in a rare session at the Justice Department Sunday. Col. North reportedly directed the clandestine arms shipments to Iran.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said he "guessed" there was such a Justice Department investigation, "looking into the events during 1985.... That would be my guess, they [the Justice Department] would like to have the facts."

The White House has said the shipments began in 1985 with at least one load of arms sent by Israel, but with the express approval of the United States.

One White House source described yesterday's meeting as "tighter than tight." Said he: "It was discussion only. No decisions, no notes taken."

Mr. Regan, one of those under pressure to step down because of the Iran deal, denied that he is considering resigning.

"I serve at the pleasure of the president and when it's time for me to go, we'll talk about it. But this isn't the time," Mr. Regan told CBS Radio.

Meanwhile, a former senior administration official predicted that Mr. Shultz, Mr. Regan and Mr. Poindexter would not survive the crisis.

"John Poindexter has been loyal to the president, which is a good deal more than can be said for Shultz," the former official said. But he added that Mr. Poindexter will probably be removed from the White House for implementing a "flawed policy."

"Don Regan has been a heavy-handed, imperious player for a long time," the former official said.

The White House chief of staff tried to "limit access and advice" to the president and "continuously meddled in foreign policy and with disastrous results," he said.

House Minority Leader Robert Michel yesterday said the president should concede that his decision was wrong.

"I know that I personally am not infallible and when I make a mistake, I admit it," said the Illinois Republican. "That's the best way."

While yesterday's session in the Situation Room of the White House — described by some as "tense" — seemed to indicate a certain amount of solidarity among top aides, the appearance of Deputy Secretary of State John C. Whitehead before the House Foreign Relations Committee seemed to re-establish some of the friction between the White House and State Department.

One source suggested that U.S. officials were unduly swayed by Israeli intelligence officers to send arms to Iran. "We may not have fully recognized that [the Israelis] had another agenda," he said, adding that Israel is not opposed to fueling the 6-year-old war between its arch-rivals, Iran and Iraq.

The administration yesterday refused to comment on reports that cited U.S. intelligence sources as saying that 100 of the 2,008 TOW anti-tank weapons shipped to Iran were intended for Afghan rebels fighting the Soviets.

Paul Hanley, a spokesman for the National Security Council, said the White House would not comment on "any details of the shipments."

Washington-based supporters for Afghan and Iranian freedom fighters strongly disputed the possibility that administration officials could successfully ship U.S. arms to Afghan rebels by way of Iran.

"If any of these weapons were truly intended for the Afghans and they passed over the border into Afghanistan, they would not have gone to genuine freedom fighters," said Karen McKay, director of Freedom Inc.

Instead, she said, the weapons would most likely have "fallen into the hands" of Khomeini-backed Islamic fundamentalists, "who frequently collaborate with the Soviets."

Mohammad Tabatabai, president of the Iran Freedom Foundation, also denounced as "highly unlikely" the possibility of U.S. arms being sent via Iran to Afghan rebels.

Edward J. Rollins, a longtime associate of the president who headed Mr. Reagan's 1984 campaign, called for Mr. Poindexter's resignation.

"Adm. Poindexter, I think, as the architect or the implementer of this plan, probably needs to go if you ever want to get the congressional support that you need," Mr. Rollins said on "CBS Morning News."

Newsweek magazine reported that shipments worth at least \$50 million were sent to Iran directly from U.S. depots, with the CIA coordinating the effort to get around the usual legal restrictions on arms exports.

The magazine said that in addition to the \$50 million sent directly from the United States, weapons sent by Israel and paid for by Washington pushed the total to as high as \$100 million, a figure mentioned by congressional sources.

The CIA chartered cargo planes to ship the arms to Tehran via Israel, Newsweek said, and Iran was never listed on the release form required to remove weapons from U.S. depots.

The Arms Export Control Act governs the transfer of U.S. military weapons to any foreign buyer, even when they are actually sold by a third country acting as a middleman. All sales must be licensed by the State Department, and any shipment of more than \$14 million must be cleared by the Defense Department with notification to Congress.